Again, the volume does not shy away from examining issues that might divide those who describe themselves as conservatives.

Two essays should be mentioned in relation to the second purpose of the collection. Both acknowledge Hadley Arkes’s ability to teach through humor and stories. The first, “On ‘Eating the Last Pizza’: The Wit of Hadley Arkes,” by James Schall, S.J., is a worthy tribute to Arkes’s rhetorical ability. Second, “Moral Education and the Art of Storytelling,” by Arkes’s student Susan McWilliams explores two reasons that stories are such effective means of moral education. First, by forcing their audience to consider a narrative other than their own, stories are “a vehicle for intellectual and imaginative expansion.” Second, by getting their audience to consider particulars, they help serve as “a means of intellectual and imaginative temperance.” I highly recommend this essay for teachers, students, parents, and anyone who loves stories.

Overall, this collection makes a valuable contribution to both scholarship and teaching, and it vindicates modern conservatism against its critics who hold that it is anti-intellectual. It is thus a fitting tribute to Hadley Arkes.

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Should Christians eat meat? This is the topic of an excellent little book recently published (appropriately) by Franciscan Media, called *For Love of Animals: Christian Ethics, Consistent Action* by Charles Camosy. In doing so, Camosy joins a coterie of Christian thinkers who have recently written in advocacy of vegetarianism, including Mary Eberstadt and Matthew Scully.

Beneath this first question though is a deeper and more critical one: why is vegetarianism common among the secular left, whereas conservative Christians, champions of justice for vulnerable populations—the unborn, the poor, the oppressed—generally kill and eat animals. Is this a failing on the part of Christians to be consistently just? Or is there a compelling argument in Christianity for man’s unchecked dominion over animals?

First, some background. Christian and secular animal ethics were severed for good in mainstream philosophical discourse several decades back. You can see the basic arguments in the writings of Princeton ethicist Peter Singer, the father of modern animal ethics. The impetus for the separation
was in trying to reconcile a certain statement of equality, “All humans are equal,” with the reality of humans’ wildly disparate abilities and circumstances. “If equality is to be related to any actual characteristics of humans, these characteristics must be some lowest common denominator, pitched so low that no human lacks them,” Singer wrote. Philosophers mostly had abandoned the idea that “intrinsic human dignity” was rooted in the soul, which placed man, if not at the peak of creation, then only a little below the angels. Because no argument for homo sapiens’s exceptionalism could include both, e.g., infants and the severely mentally retarded but exclude high-intelligence animals without falling back on transcendental “bunkum,” therefore one must establish a new baseline for ethical consideration, one set very low. The new baseline was sentience, or the ability to feel pleasure and pain, and prefer one over the other. So in modern animal ethics, sentient creatures deserve ethical consideration, and any person or culture that does not extend such consideration is unjust, or at least inconsistent.

As far as inconsistency, take for example the brief ruckus around the 2002 World Cup, partially hosted in Seoul, South Korea, where dog is commonly eaten. To Westerners, dogs are pets, but when formulating consistent arguments for why it is permissible to slaughter and eat some animals and not others, especially roughly equally intelligent mammals like cows and dogs, most Western opponents fell back on arguing that dogs are “companion animals.” As Singer argues, any claim that humans ought to enjoy special ethical consideration over other equally sentient creatures is speciesist—and so is any claim that one sentient nonhuman animal is morally superior to another. Speciesism, in case you’re wondering, is like racism, but one taxonomic rung higher.

Inasmuch as some Christian thinkers may disagree with some animal ethicists, there is something that both sides agree on: Christianity is speciesist. Singer and Camosy agree that Christianity’s idea of imago Dei, for example, contributed to the “unique status” of humans throughout history. St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, wrote that, “it matters not how man behaves to animals, for God has subjected all things to man’s power.”

The too-easy answer behind Christian “dominion” ethics is that animals are soulless and thus animal pain doesn’t matter. Or animals do have a sensitive soul but not a rational one, and their suffering is permissible if it serves a human good. This and similar thinking is precisely what had Descartes boiling cats. To Camosy, though, the question is one of justice. “Christian justice means consistently and actively working to see that individuals and groups—especially vulnerable populations on the margins—are given what they are owed,” he writes. “It will be especially skeptical of practices which promote violence, consumerism, and autonomy.”
Is it morally, or even biblically, consistent to claim that because we have a rational soul and animals do not that animals deserve no moral consideration? If there’s one chapter for which you ought to read Camosy’s book, it’s “Animals and the Bible,” which is probably the best and most concise exposition of the total confusion around animals’ ethical status in the Bible.

Here’s some of it decocted. On the one hand we see in the prelapsarian world an implied vegetarianism between the animals and an absence of death. We see the same in the eschaton: “the calf and the lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 11:6). Remember, too, that burnt offerings were abolished in the new covenant. And in Acts 15, when the earliest Christians debated what of the Jewish Law to keep, they decided on just four, three of which dealt with animal meat. But how can we reconcile these with Genesis 9: “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you”? Or with Acts 10 and Peter’s vision of the unclean animals in which God commands him, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat”? And we read of at least six instances where Jesus explicitly ate fish, and we might infer that he ate lamb at the Last Supper, per Passover tradition. And what about the drowning of the pigs? Camosy deftly navigates this subject better than any before him, and comes up with this thesis, echoed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

It is only . . . after sin has entered the world that God gives limited permission to eat meat and wear animal skin. . . . God entrusted animals to the stewardship of those whom he created in his own image. Hence it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing. It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly.

This is less of a free buffet pass than it looks, because our license here hinges on the word needlessly. In biblical times—hardscrabble and malnourished as they were—domesticated animals were a huge competitive advantage in the survival of humans, and it’s not a stretch to say that meat then was necessary. But do we need meat or animal products to survive today? Camosy says no. We eat meat “for two main reasons: (1) it is cheap and easy, and (2) it gives us pleasure.”

Neither are we consistent in choosing which animals to eat. Contrary to what the previously mentioned World Cup–occasioned critics think, all animals “according to God’s will, are meant to be Adam’s companions.” John Paul II called this stewardship over animals a “serious obligation.” Benedict XVI said the “degrading of living creatures to a commodity seems to me in fact to contradict the relationship of mutuality that comes across in the Bible.” Camosy writes that we are to rule over animals how
“Jesus rules over us, [with] a radical suspicion of violence and a commitment to servant leadership.”

But Camosy also writes this: The application of a principle is not like taking a taxi but rather like riding on a bus—you have to follow it wherever it goes. And a consistent and nonviolent animal ethics goes a long way. Beyond forgoing meat, what about cosmetics that have been tested on animals? What about taking medicine derived from laboratory-animal experimentation? Or adopting a puppy and in some way “materially cooperating” with the evil that is puppy mills. Camosy acknowledges that the honest application of these is countercultural in the extreme, but it is also a true imitation of “Christ’s self-emptying, his rejection of sinful appetites and—ultimately—his holiness.”

Christianity is not easy, and Camosy’s argument is not just for love of animals, but for consistent conduct of Catholic principles. Recall Flannery O’Connor: “What people don’t realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.”

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The secularization thesis holds that religious enthusiasm in the Western world was at its peak in the Middle Ages and has been in a slow decline ever since. Until the past few decades, this was the conventional wisdom in sociology, as most believed that the inevitable consequence of modernity is the decline of religion. The work of Emile Durkheim is central to the foundation of the secularization thesis; he represented the traditional function of religion as symbolizing the identity of a community—a metaphor of social order. Max Weber maintained that the “routinization of charisma” and the increasing dominance of science would destroy religion.

Yet, sociologist Peter Berger’s classic essay in First Things, “Secularization Falsified,” maintains that “Religion has not been declining. On the contrary, in much of the world there has been a veritable explosion of religious faith.” And, although sociologist Rodney Stark’s entire body of work disputes a linear decline of religion—providing evidence that churchgoing has increased rather than declined over the centuries—many sociologists maintain that secularization continues, especially in the West.